For a century and a half Europe’s religious-inspired civil and international wars had plunged Europe into anarchy so there was a need for order, a craving for strong rulers.

The justification for absolutism was provided by philosophers such as Jean Bodin (1530–96) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). For Hobbes, writing after the Civil War in England, in a state of nature it was ‘all against all’. The only guarantee of a person’s self-preservation was his own defence. The only way to end this anarchy and have peace and security would be if individuals agreed in a ‘social contract’ to surrender their rights of self-defence definitively to a sovereign authority (one man or an assembly) which would ensure obedience to a code of rules, if necessary by force. In the Commonwealth thus created the sovereign authority was not accountable to its subjects but only to God and his laws. The power of the authority was absolute and indivisible. Having surrendered his or her rights to it the only rights the subject now had (apart from that of self-defence) would be those re-granted by that authority. The authority was above the civil laws because if these were over it there would be a confusion in the exercise of power, an end to the Commonwealth and a return to the state of nature. Power could not be divided because any quarrel between the holders would lead to the destruction of the Commonwealth. To oppose the sovereign authority would mean civil war and an end to the Commonwealth since a subject could not obey two masters. The idea that the private judgement of individuals was the ultimate arbiter of what was true and proper was seditious since it implied that they could still possess in the Commonwealth what they held in the state of nature.

To begin with the tendency was to associate the strong ruler with the King, in terms of Divine Right, although Hobbes’ theory of consent could – and was – used to justify the rule of Oliver Cromwell. Bodin believed that the King was the image of God on earth. But during the eighteenth century, as religion declined in the
face of the philosophical challenge of the Enlightenment, rulers such as Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia, would justify their position and powers less in terms of Divine Right and more in being the first servant of their state, dedicated to efficient rule.  

But as with the creation of the nation, so the exercise of royal absolutism required continued domination of alternative sources of power, notably the aristocracy and the church. How this was done on the continent depended on the way society in the individual countries had developed, but the technique was the same, holding out the poisoned chalice of privilege in order to obtain compliance in the organisation of the state. But for all the countries concerned there would be a high price to pay.

In France that price was bankruptcy and inefficiency that would lead to defeat and revolution.

As a young king, Louis XIV (1643–1715) had had to flee his capital when some of the nobility joined with the Parlement of Paris (parlements promulgated royal decrees) at the raising of taxes. He was determined that a like humiliation would not happen again, and that the royal power must be absolute.

Accordingly the nobility was emasculated, and became almost parasitic – Louis moved his court to the palace of Versailles, fifteen miles outside Paris, and it was there, amid rigid social ceremony and etiquette, that the high nobility intrigued for positions of influence decided by the King. These positions might be in the church or the army; they might be meaningless posts or sinecures; but they were very rarely in government, whether national or provincial. Government itself was by royal decree, implemented by departmental ministers appointed by the King. Instead of the old feudal provinces France was divided into some thirty généralités controlled by royal Intendants. Ministers and ‘Intendants’ were men of talent, usually commoners. Away from their traditional power bases the senior nobility could not provoke anti-government unrest, and without them the provincial nobility had no leadership. In return, and in addition to their appointment to offices in and around the court, the nobility were exempt from almost all royal taxation, and their sinecures and pensions were paid by state revenue.

The clergy too was exempt from royal taxation, paying only a don gratuit. Yet its properties yielded an income of between forty and fifty per cent of landed wealth. In Catholic countries like France the Church’s corporate wealth in land, tithes, precious